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ABSTRACT

A framework for using the material contained in French high school business correspondence manuals to teach business correspondence in French as a second language is presented. The intent is to introduce the function of various letter formats and to facilitate deciphering the content of the letters. Exercises promote situational analysis of information to be conveyed as well as directed and free letter composition. Three aspects of French letter-writing are emphasized: (1) the purpose and formalities of common types of business letters; (2) the cultural ramifications of style, word selection, and tone; and (3) the set expressions and "formulas" of standard correspondence vocabulary. Guidelines to be used in preparing to write a letter are outlined, and some class exercises are described. (MSE)

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TECHNIQUES OF TEACHING BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE
IN FRENCH

by

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Techniques of Teaching Business Correspondence in French

Jayne Abrate

The techniques of formal correspondence form an integral part of commercial or professional French language instruction. An important means of communication, particularly in international relationships, effective letter writing is a skill which users of the language must frequently employ in a work environment. However, many Americans have great difficulty assimilating the artificial, elaborate form of French business correspondence which contrasts so strongly with the American style where almost anything that conveys the message is acceptable. This structural divergence may arise from the fact that language is often viewed by Americans as merely a tool of communication, while the French jealously guard their language from "impurities" and consider its elegant use an art form in itself. For pedagogical purposes, it is just this dimension of French which creates difficulties in both comprehension and letter composition for students whose mastery of the language is not yet complete. Nevertheless, while textbooks contain sections on correspondence, and several manuals devoted entirely to the subject have been published, little has yet been written suggesting a systematic approach to developing this important skill.

Of course, even native French speakers must learn how to construct clear and concise yet melodious prose, and numerous manuals

exist in France devoted to teaching the rudiments of correspondence to high school students in technical or vocational programs. The principles set forth in these texts can be used as the basis of a supplementary component to a general business class, or even an entire course on commercial correspondence for college-level American students of French. This paper will suggest a basic framework for using the material contained in these manuals to introduce the function of various formats and to facilitate deciphering the content. From a thorough understanding of form and content will evolve exercises designed to promote situational analysis of information to be conveyed and both directed and free letter composition with eventual refinement into a workable end result.

Three fundamental areas must be examined in depth for students to gain the competencies and confidence necessary to produce acceptable documents: 1) the purpose and formalities of common types of business letters; 2) the cultural ramifications of style, word selection, and tone; and 3) set expressions and formules which comprise the standard correspondence vocabulary. In addition, the ability to manipulate these building blocks in accordance with a letter's objective and the personal relationship of the correspondants must be fostered. Each point reflects a French character quite distinct from its American equivalent, and when, in the process of formulating a letter, a student does not consider specifically these aspects, his efforts at communication often break down in confusion. Unfortunately, at such a time students often fail to see where they erred and become frustrated and discouraged that their letter fails to

attain the standards set by the teacher. In fact, one hurdle may stem from the fact that instructors are asking students to switch from composition and personal essays or term papers where the primary objective is to express personal ideas in a reasonably coherent, grammatical way to a highly stylized form of writing within tight confines and, consequently, with few or no grammatical flaws. In attempting to utilize the numerous idioms, students may switch from using je to nous, confuse prepositions, or encounter difficulties with the causative faire construction as in veuillez me faire parvenir.... In struggling to put thoughts into French, resorting to direct translation fails them at every turn. Therefore, it is useful to analyze these items from the outset so that the fledgling correspondants can be forewarned.

After a brief presentation of essential stylistic differences between French and English business letters, students consider several sample letters for comprehension purposes. The rationale guiding the composition of a business letter is discussed as well as its place in a French enterprise. Students learn that, although this habit is evolving, the French prefer letters to telephone calls and that even when the telephone is used, a follow-up letter provides confirmation where precise details are involved. A letter is considered a legal document, especially when combined with the common practice of sending lettres recommandées. Thus, as LeGoff states, the "cardinal virtue of a French business letter is prudence."¹ By examining the letterhead with its legal and commercial requirements, such as mention of the raison sociale, Registre de Commerce number,

or montant du capital as well as the address, telephone, and telex, invariable aspects of form can be presented.

Students receive two essential pieces of advice for use in real-life situations: 1)--although obviously not applicable in class--it is better to write in English than in bad French, and if students are unsure of their style or accuracy, it is preferable to use a format taken directly from a reference book; and 2) rather than attempting to translate letters from English to French or vice versa, it is less hazardous to extract the significant information and then to compose a new letter communicating it. Since most undergraduate students beginning commercial French study do not have the necessary skills to translate idiomatically, this second point directs their attention away from messy literal interpretations and encourages them to stick to the formulas.

While sample letters can come from a manual, from a personal file, or be culled from various texts, they should represent clearly the different functions which a letter can fulfill. Among those commonly cited one finds: lettre d'accompagnement, lettre de demande, lettre de réponse à une demande, lettre d'information, lettre de commande, réponse à une commande ou accusé de réception, accusé de réception d'une commande et proposition d'un autre article, lettre de réclamation, réponse à une lettre de réclamation, and lettre de règlement. By defining the purpose of the communication, students can focus on what details it is important to mention, reiterate, clarify, or correct. As they proceed to compose their own letters, such a determination aids them in selecting the appropriate

information to include and expressions to use. The earliest exercises are comprised of content questions based on a letter. However, these might be expanded and combined with other material by asking students to fill out an order blank, a bank or postal check, a lettre de change, or customs declaration using information given. Not only must students understand the factual content, they begin to see how correspondence fits into the activities of a business and directly influences other areas.

As the class becomes more familiar with various expressions and formulas, an overhead projection can help raise awareness of the subtle overtones communicated by certain introductory phrases. With the main clause covered, the pertinent expression is exposed. By looking only at the first few words of a sentence--j'ai l'honneur de, veuillez nous communiquer, je suis au regret de vous informer, dans l'attente d'une réponse favorable/immédiate--students must determine, for example, what type of letter it is, if a favorable or unfavorable response is being given, or the relationship that exists between the expéditeur and destinataire. Highlighting the various introductory phrases allows students to observe their primary function as subtle signals of tone and nuance rather than as vehicles for conveying information.

Although basic format has been discussed in relation to sample letters, as students prepare to write their own documents, the main elements are schematized. As in the manuals, the letter is divided into zones which contain specific details. A handout listing fine points of presentation that are important from an aesthetic

perspective, although not crucial to comprehension is distributed and includes the following:

- 1) The French add the place the letter is written in front of the date, primarily for legal reasons.
- 2) The date is written le 4 novembre 1988.³
- 3) Titles are included in the address, repeated in the salutation and formule de politesse, and the title of the destinataire is never abbreviated (although the title of a third party referred to in the text might be).
- 4) In writing addresses, the French often completely capitalize surnames, cities, and countries. A comma follows the street number, and the zip code precedes the city.
- 5) Cher is never used in a business letter unless one knows the recipient well; even then, it would not always be appropriate depending upon his or her position in the company hierarchy and the object of the letter.
- 6) The salutation concludes with a comma rather than a colon.
- 7) Proper names of the recipient or sender should be avoided in the salutation and the body of the letter.

These guidelines are particularly important to American students because American usage differs in each case. It is stressed that while these details may seem insignificant, such errors give the letter a sloppy appearance and may diminish the writer's credibility in the eyes of the recipient. A French reader would interpret such basic mistakes as a sign of ignorance and, therefore, might give less weight to the more important message.

The formule de politesse provides an elaborate, artificial closing to a formal letter. While this element is relatively easy to grasp, especially if presented as a "formula," some familiarity with the different variants is required before a student can confidently strike out on his own. The formule de politesse equals "sincerely" in English, and in exercises, any attempt on the student's part to "translate" it is penalized. A chart including certain basic structures is furnished, but at a beginning level it is not necessary to be exhaustive or to examine the more intricate points of adjective selection, for example. A standard, neutral ending is proposed, such as Je vous prie d'accepter, Monsieur, l'expression de mes sentiments distingués, as well as one to be used to a superior and with an apology. These fundamentals of letter composition represent the relatively invariable sections which students can master more readily.

Once students have assimilated the framework, they can further analyze purpose and content. Many cultural components influence the objective and tone of a business letter. The hierarchical structure of French business and government, the impersonal tone that prevails in official communication, and the subtle means by which nuances are expressed contribute to the determination of vocabulary, turns of phrase, and formule de politesse chosen. For instance, the strict hierarchy in French organizations establishes to whom a letter should be addressed. While it is acceptable to respond directly to someone who has written to you, if you are initiating contact, particularly when a service or response is required, it is crucial to

write to the appropriate individual. While it is not a faux pas in the U.S. to send your request to the person you think most likely to get the job done or to someone you know within a company, in France this might create problems. Similarly, in choosing expressions and introductory phrases, it is quite easy for a beginner to slip unknowingly from cordial to overly familiar or from firm, in demanding a late payment, for example, to insulting. It is essential to understand fully the appropriate nuances, for if the letter is well-written grammatically, the reader will assume that the sender comprehends cultural implications as well. If this is not the case, misunderstandings will arise.

Students must remember that when they are writing a letter in French to a French business or government agency, they are entering the hierarchy and must be aware of their position in it. This applies to the job candidate, the salesman trying to sell his product, the buyer looking for a supplier, the tourist requesting information, or the businessman trying to ship his merchandise. In order to deal effectively with French business, one must remember that every employee is not of equal importance. Although this holds true in any business setting where: "Le fournisseur essaiera de garder un bon contact avec le client malgré les circonstances, alors que le client se contentera de rester poli,"⁴ the consequences for future dealings are more directly influenced by the external variables of language.

Thus, in preparing to compose the body of a letter, students are instructed to ask numerous questions in the pre-writing stage. Hopefully, they will have amassed a number of expressions in their notes,

handouts, and textbook which provide them with a pool of expressions from which to choose. As with a well-organized piece of writing in any language, there should be an introduction, body, and conclusion which take into consideration the goal of the letter and the cultural input including:

- 1) Who are the sender and recipient, and what is their business and/or personal relationship?
- 2) What is the position of each individual within his/her company?
- 3) What is the general purpose of the letter?
- 4) Do you require specific information or action in response to this letter? Is so, is it out of the ordinary?
- 5) Are you writing for yourself (that is, for something that specifically concerns your area of responsibility) or as a representative of your entire organization?

Concerning the specific text:

- 6) What information should you include in the introduction (reason for writing, reference to previous communication, referral)?
- 7) What important information to be requested and/or communicated should you include in the body (items, quantity, color, price, shipping charges, for instance, in relation to an order)?
- 8) For the conclusion, what result or response do you expect and when?
- 9) What point (thanks, urgency, personal comment), if any,

should you use to open the formule?

In many circumstances, business letters will be of such a nature that a standard format, if not form letter, can be used. In the event that a letter has to be written sur mesure, these questions prove helpful in eliciting responses which determine the underlying structure and establish the tone of the correspondence.

Both Herman⁴ and LeGoff have wisely suggested placing any letter-writing activity in the context of a student-created business which must react to a variety of inquiries and circumstances. Such exercises force students to consider several perspectives of a problem as well as the consequences of their actions in the course of answering coherently and realistically. In the beginning, students can simply adapt sample letters or pick and choose appropriate sentences to convey a message, but they must remember that the skill of business letter writing is based on building blocks and that, short of possessing complete mastery of the language, linguistic creativity is discouraged.

As a result, subsequent exercises seek to improve the learners' facility in manipulating the structures. They are actively encouraged to eliminate such glaring errors as including s'il vous plaît instead of veuillez, using an imperative rather than a causative faire construction, or speaking directly when the conditionnel de politesse would be more appropriate. In addition to composing letters from sample sources, they are also asked to rewrite a given letter, substituting equivalent expressions whenever possible or eliminating terms such as envoyer, dire, faire in favor of synonyms

like expédier, informer, or passer. During all testing, students may use books, dictionary, and notes to complete their letters.

As a further means of achieving internalization of the idioms and structures of formal correspondence, a computer program is under development which would take them through the various steps involved in composing a letter. Questions are asked, and a series of possible expressions is offered depending on the answers. The student is then free to select and/or modify one that appeals to him. For instance, an initial question might be: "Has there been any previous contact with the recipient to which this letter is a response?" with a possible follow-up: "Was it a letter, phone call, visit, telex, etc.?" If the answer to the first is "yes," a list of opening phrases appears, including en réponse à votre lettre, me référant à votre lettre, or je vous accuse réception de votre lettre, with lettre varying to agree with the answer to the follow-up question. Once the student has typed his choice, the program might then ask if he wishes to include the date of this communication. Having considered a series of issues raised by the program's prompts, the student will have typed a complete letter which, at the conclusion, he is invited to reread and revise.

The issues raised in teaching business correspondence may prove significant hindrances to communication and are sometimes neglected in favor of achieving a final product. Students are being asked to perform a new kind of writing for which they are often ill-prepared. By taking into account questions of cultural values, examining the meanings and subtleties of common idioms, and prac-

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ticing their manipulation in a specific context students are better able to sift through the verbiage to comprehend French business correspondence as well as to produce more effective letters on their own.

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NOTES

¹Claude LeGoff, "Pour une pédagogie de la correspondance d'affaires," French Review, 56, 2 (Dec. 1982), p. 244.

²A.M. Kulunkian, Correspondance et Techniques d'expression professionnelles (Paris: Nathan, 1985), pp. 1-47.

³Correct presentation of the date bears mentioning, since students learn this in elementary French but regularly forget as they write their letters, adding de after the month, for example.

⁴Denise Guback, Français commercial: Théorie et correspondance (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), p.142.

⁵In general, I tell my students that the more unusual the request, the more polite must be the phrase, and in order to render it more politely in formal French, one generally uses more words: veuillez me faire savoir vs. Ayez l'obligeance de bien vouloir me faire savoir.

⁶Gerald Herman, "Teaching the Skills of French Business Correspondence to American Undergraduates: Problems and Techniques," French Review, 61, 1 (Oct. 1987), pp. 12-20.

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